

Writing Military History

General Techniques

- ◆ Total immersion
- ◆ Simmer, don't boil
- ◆ “Ideas” file
- ◆ Stay organized

Total Immersion

- ◆ Work on nothing else

- ◆ Live it, breathe it

Yeah, right

- ◆ Carve out blocks of time

- ◆ Don't let it go cold

- Failing that, leave notes for yourself

Simmer, Don't Boil

- ◆ Pace yourself
- ◆ Allow time for ideas to formulate
 - Take long walks
 - Carry notebook
- ◆ *Eureka* moments rarely come when you're hard at work
- ◆ Don't write after 1800 hrs.

Dream on, pal

“Ideas” File

- ◆ Keep record of bright ideas
- ◆ Don’t trust your memory
- ◆ Discard rate: 75%
- ◆ *The best ideas come unbidden*

Stay Organized

- ◆ Make space: tabletop, not computer station
- ◆ Keep everything in one place
- ◆ File notes rationally
 - Cross-index by source/content
- ◆ Tidy up regularly
 - Reacquire “big picture”
 - Break writer’s block

Research

◆ Step 1: Aimless wallowing

- Read general works
- Find the significant issues
- Learn the names, dates, places
- *Osmosis, minimal note-taking*
- Begin generating bibliographic cards
 - ◆ Complete information

Research

◆ Step 2: Find the “kernel” (kick back and reflect)

- What is the central issue?
- What can I say about this that is new?
- Default research question:
 - ◆ “What factors made this process/event turn out the way it did?”
 - ◆ “Which of those factors were most important?”
- Answer to question = thesis statement

Bad Research Questions

- ◆ The choice of research question and design, and not the mishandling of evidence, is the root of most avoidable bias
- ◆ Even an honest inquiry into a biased or meaningless question will produce bad results

Bad Research Questions:

1

◆ “Why was Lee a great general?”

- Presupposes that he was
- “Why” questions can be answered non-empirically
- Hagiography follows

◆ “What tenets of leadership did Lee follow?”

- Presupposes that there are such universal tenets
- What is proven if the tenet-writer used Lee as a model?
- Tenets might be so vague as to fit anyone if you are selective enough

Bad Research Questions:

2

◆ “What were the contributions of Irish-Americans to the Civil War?”

- Invites listing and narrative, not analysis
- “Contributions” might mean anything
- Camouflage for special agenda

Bad Research Questions:

3

◆ “A justification of Missouri Confederates in irregular operations”

- Not a question
- Deliberately one-sided to “counterbalance” “pro-Union” interpretations
 - ◆ Literary “pong” game
 - ◆ No truth can emerge from a debate between two fallacies
 - ◆ History should be heuristic

Bad Research Questions:

4

- ◆ “Was Lincoln a racist?”
 - Agenda inevitable
 - *Anachronism*: standards of 1990s NAACP applied to 1860; guilty verdict inevitable
- ◆ “What antecedents to AirLand battle did Napoleon practice?”
 - *Presentism*: misrepresents Napoleon by exclusion
 - Modern terminology carries baggage

Bad Research Questions:

5

◆ “A History of Confederate Uniforms”

- *Antiquarianism*
- Not a question; the “answer” can prove nothing
- *Doesn’t mean it won’t sell!*

Research

◆ Step 3: Focused research

- Define specific subordinate questions
- Search out specific bodies of information
- Generate *tentative* thesis statement
- Stay open-minded: evidence trumps opinion
- Follow the footnote trail

Advantages of Cards over Electrons

- ◆ Logistically simpler
- ◆ Take up less space at workplace
- ◆ Tangible sense of progress
- ◆ Easier to manipulate
 - Extract, re-sort, recombine
- ◆ Not software-dependent

Color-Coding Notes

- ◆ Primary/Archival
- ◆ Secondary/Monographs (published)
- ◆ Journals
- ◆ Reference
 - Data from reference sources
 - Data generated
 - ◆ Unit composition
 - ◆ Dates of rank

Notecard Format

Black, Robert C.

1

The Railroads of the Confederacy

Chapel Hill: UNC Pr, 1998 [1952]

- 17-18 Trains seldom > 15 cars, load limit per car 16,000 lbs. [Car itself 4,000 lbs]
- 20 PRR operated 220 locos betw Phila & Pittsb; more than all RRs in VA.
- 21 ★One cord of wood good for 50-60 mi.
- 22-23 Tredegar built 40+ locos by 1861 [see White, Loco]
- 23-24 RF&P built 3 locos before 1861. Richmond & Danville, Monty_ & West Point, Central of Ga built a few
- 31-32 Avg passenger speed on NC mail train, incl stops, 15 mph. [Poor track was main restriction on speed.]
- 37-38 At time of CW, southern RRs still feeders to water trans. True trunk lines were the waterways.

Use one side only. Cards are cheap

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Evaluating Evidence

- ◆ “Facts” need interpretation
 - A “fact” is the answer to a question—what was the question?
 - What assumptions underly the “fact?”
- ◆ Evidence should be *valid* and *pertinent to your question*

Interpreting a Fact

- ◆ Fact: “The British suffered 50% casualties on the first day of the Somme offensive”
 - “British” = British Empire? BEF? Second Army? Assault waves?
 - “Casualties” = killed? Killed + wounded? Killed + wounded + missing? Psychiatric? Treated and released?
 - How does this compare to other assaults?
 - *Fallacy: assuming that any given assault battalion suffered 50% casualties*

Breaking the Ice

- ◆ *Wrong:* cut and paste digitized notes
- ◆ *Wrong:* sit down with a pile of notecards and start composing complete sentences
- ◆ *Right:* OUTLINE!
 - Break project into manageable chunks
 - Conceptualize down to sentence level
 - Avoid organizing and composing simultaneously

Outline, Outline, Outline

1. Overall structure: kick back and reflect
2. Major sections (chapters)
3. Key concepts
 1. Rough-in information
 2. Sequence information
 3. Put in transitions

Run bottom-up feedback constantly:

Information supports section, section supports overall structure, structure supports thesis statement

Advantages of Legal Pad Over PC in Outlining

- ◆ Visualization
- ◆ Easier to manipulate and restructure concepts
- ◆ Pruning is psychologically easier
- ◆ Precludes temptation of premature composition

CSRR: Overall Structure

Thesis: CSRRs were all hosed up

1. State of inferiority, 1861
2. Inferior management during war
3. Wear and tear
4. US raids
5. State of collapse, 1865

Outlining Objectives

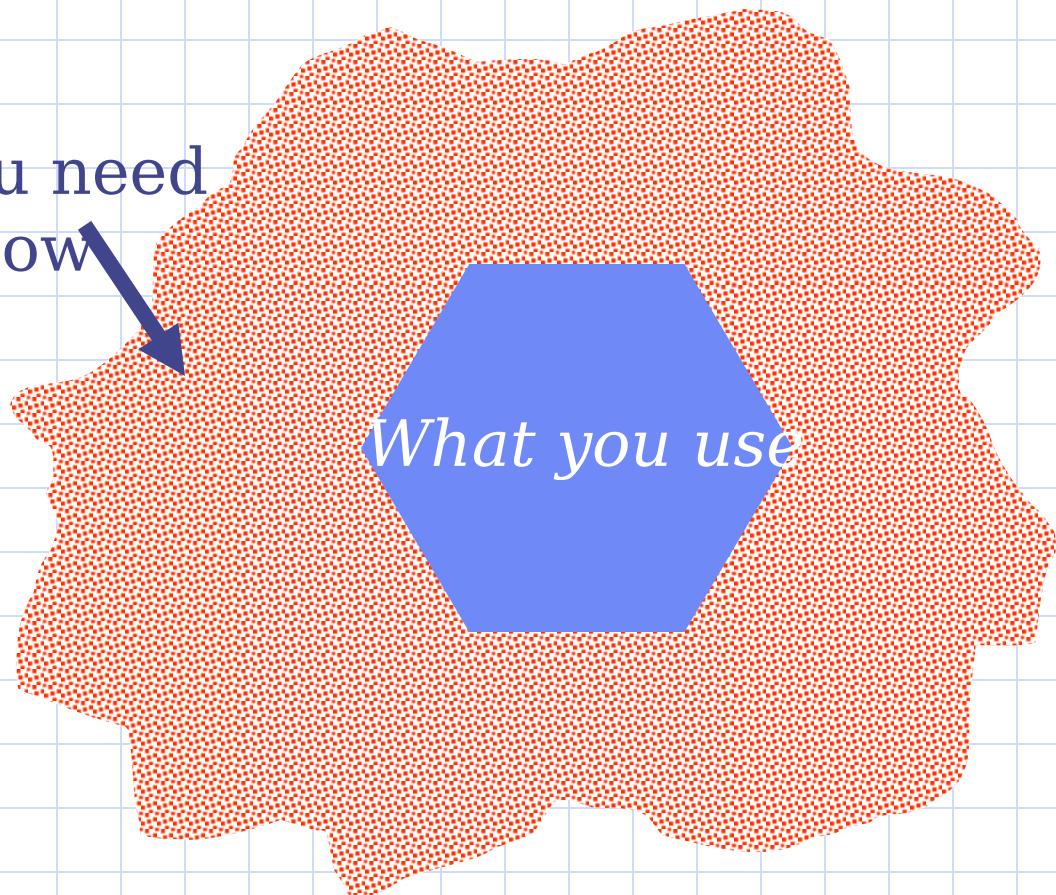
- ◆ Logical, persuasive organization
- ◆ Narrative flow
- ◆ Make all structural modifications
 - Right info, right place
- ◆ *Key creative step*
- ◆ *Makes composition easy*
 - Paragraphs and sentences are prefabricated
 - Now you can focus on artful composition

When laziness is a virtue, pt. 2

Don't feel obliged to write
everything you know

Selectivity While Writing

What you need
to know



Composition

- ◆ Suit the style to your audience
- ◆ Write for the ages
 - Avoid jargon and acronyms
- ◆ Simple and direct
- ◆ *It is your duty to express your ideas well*
- ◆ *Not your readers duty to discern your true, though concealed, genius*

Multiple Drafts

- ◆ First draft: legal pad
 - Easier to manipulate
 - If you write a passage, cross it out, then change your mind, the original is still there
 - Better visualization of overall product
- ◆ Second draft: digits
- ◆ *Multiple drafts improves “digestion,” knocks off rough edges*

When laziness is a virtue, pt. 3

If the words just will not come, or if you are too sick of a passage to rewrite it

Try leaving it out altogether

Composition: The Conclusion

- ◆ **Adequate:** “Here’s what I told you just in case you are too dense to remember what I wrote 60 pages ago”
 - (You might have written Chapter 1 three months ago, but the reader saw Chapter 1 an hour ago)
- ◆ **Better:** “So what? What larger issue does this essay inform? Here’s why you should care”

Put the Pen to Paper

- Draw on your *experience*, your *training*, and your *readings*
- Research is the means to an end
- Must begin the writing process as soon as possible
- Develop a pattern
- Develop a style of proper mechanics

Historical Work

Critical analysis of the facts

- Determination of conclusions
- If possible, lessons learned

• Historical Work via Clausewitz

- Historical investigation and deterring of doubtful facts
- Tracing of effects to cause, (real critical inquiry)
- Testing the means employed (critical narration/historical investigation)

Conduct the Research

- Working Bibliography
- Examine the books (value, detect bias)
- Various sources (Magazines, Newspapers, Army Records, Gen Orders, ARs, FMs, JCCS papers)
- Prepare a rough outline
- Skeptical/Critical questions developed from research

Conduct the

Research

meaning + significance = New contribution of knowledge

- Arrange draft – Chronological or Topical
- Research for writing aids – Maps, Photographs, Historical and Geographical Atlases

The Rules of Writing

- CLARITY
- Unity and Coherence
- Emphasis
- Sentence Structure
- Diction = (shift F7)
- Define Technical Terms
- Avoid Jargons & Trite Expressions

Do's and

Donts and Know your subject- Weapons, communications, supply facilities, maps, roads, bridges, vehicles

- Know 'the life of the common soldier'
- Do not become a slave to your notes
- Draft Review Notes Revise Review Notes
Endnote
- Have others review your work - English Dept, SME, Style Guide
- Stamp of Authenticity = Documentation, Don't be an Ambrose